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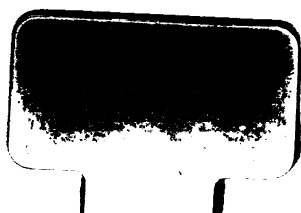
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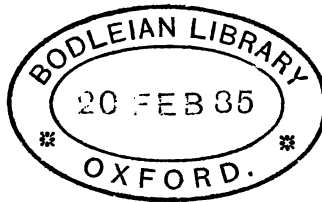
Books and Reading

OUR DUTY AS MEN AND CHURCHMEN

BY

PAUL W. WYATT, M.A., F.L.S.

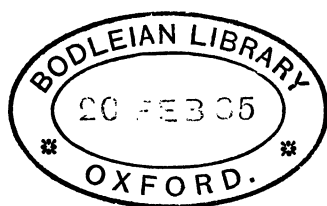
MINISTER OF S. PHILIP'S, REGENT STREET, AND LATE EVENING PREACHER OF
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THE contents of these pages were delivered shortly before the recent meeting of the Church Congress. At that meeting the subject treated of was brought forward in a very able paper and discussed at length. These thoughts of one working in the centre of London life, and which seemed to him desirable to put before his own people—many of them young *employés*—are published in the hope that they may tend to stimulate the interest which is felt by many on this question.

P. W. W.

38, PICCADILLY,
October 14, 1884.

"Understandest thou what thou readest?"

"How can I, except some one should guide me?"

BOOKS AND READING.¹

READING has become to us, in these days, a great part of the necessary duty and self-imposed task of each day. From newspaper to magazine, from bookstall-novel to biography or scientific or philosophic treatise, from penny sensationals to earnest appeals on social abuses, from the Devil's latest brochure to God's Bible the eyes of this generation seem never to be taken off the printed page.

Reading as
the chief
means of
education.

From reading you and I get the vastly greater part of our knowledge—the rest is from intercourse with our fellow-men, from our own thoughts and from our own experience and work. Sometimes we are tempted to think that these means of education are too unevenly balanced, and that men and women and children read too much and find out too little for themselves. Men of thirty, standing midway between two generations—those of middle life and our school children—feel separated a whole gulf from either in the matter of method of teaching that they have gone through. There is almost as great an increase of paths to

¹ Preached at S. Philip's, Regent Street, on Sunday morning, September 28

Leaving
school.

the royal road of learning in these last twenty-five years, as in the quarter of a century before. It is easy to go to school now in one sense, viz. that so much time and trouble is saved the scholar because of improved systems of teaching, and yet at the same time men stop to ask whether it is not in reality much harder for our children now, because of the mass of teaching and education which these days have chosen to require. And then directly the lad or girl leaves school and is free to choose, printed matter of all sorts and sizes and descriptions is before their eyes. Read they will—it is already a formed habit. God help them to choose aright; to take what will help them on in the path of life and keep them not only from what will pollute and will destroy the moral convictions within them, but equally what will slowly sap the will and enfeeble the effort and overcloud the clear judgment of right and wrong and aim and conduct.

And how are they to find out useful and instructive literature? Well, one way in which God truly works is through their elders. They advise and help them.

“Understandest thou what thou readest?”
“How can I except some man should guide me?”
Of course they cannot understand; they cannot distinguish what is best; they cannot detect the lurking harm in this or that book or course of reading. I am sure you have frequently seen in

the accounts of young criminals how they own Sensational literature. to have been first led to commit certain acts by the love of exciting adventures put into their minds by reading penny trash—that tossed up scum and froth of literature that lies in our side-streets and byeways. It is constantly coming up. We should almost laugh at the accounts of the old highway robbers and the lives of modern burglars, if we did not find this sort of literature actually does stir up in the minds of lads the desire to emulate them. I say it is almost inconceivable if it were not frequently found to be true. Now, most undesirable is it to attempt to make boys prigs by for ever giving them histories of self-made men and virtuous boys, and industrious clerks and apprentices to read : this may become ridiculous, and what is more, the boys are sharp enough to detect it, and see that much of it is not worth the reading—but equally there is a stock of literature most suitable, most Remedies and substitutes. instructive, and to any sensible and manly lad, quite as interesting as sensational reading. Take elementary science : it is put in a charming and popular form. It is hardly possible to overrate Popular science. the value of this training. It educates the mind and eye and hand ; it teaches that power of observation which makes a man at once his own companion if he be alone, and equally the most entertaining friend if he shares his society with you. It gives him a fresh and keen interest in

Art, &c.

each walk, in every visit to a new place or building or scene, and it surely refines and heightens his character at each turn. Then popular books of Art. How easily any one can make new pleasures for himself from these! They teach him to find out beauties in nature, in architecture, in the sky whether sunlit or clouded or star-studded. They show him glimpses of the great Master-builder and Painter in Nature around him, and efforts of his fellow-men which surely otherwise he had passed by without noticing. The same tree or the old familiar building has now a new charm to him; be it in foliage or leafless, in sunshine or shadow. Then there are entertaining histories—there are excellent biographies. What sets of thoughts may these suggest, giving fresh interests in the doings of others! and there are, thank God, good sound books of fiction, with a teaching in them. This mention leads us to the special consideration of fiction itself. This probably has the greatest because the widest power of all. Numerically, books of fiction outweigh all other literature, and fiction can rise to the highest uses, or can be degraded to the most wretched ministering to frivolous time-wasting, or to the morbid skirting round the vices that it dare not openly paint. Now a thing that very much has struck me in London is the place the cheap novel holds. I travel a great deal in third-class carriages round London, to and from the suburbs, and in conse-

Fiction:

quence meet a good many of the working classes of all sorts: and what does one see? The clerk or shopman or young shopwoman constantly pulls out of his or her pocket one of these books with their unmistakable covers, and, opening at the turned-down pages, reads a chapter or so before the end of the short journey. Now, amongst those books there are, of course, many of excellent reading of the kind we have mentioned, but equally there are many that possess a fearful power; they are not distinctly immoral—one had almost said, “better that they were;” they are not mere tissues of falsehood—one had almost said again, “better that they were;” they do not possess any special feature that at the first sight strikes the eye. What then is the objection? It is that they treat of an unreal life, they invite their readers to look upon the chief aim as an artificial, luxurious, indolent, and frivolous passing of the time; though not immoral in the strict sense, their morality is a poor, shaky, unstable affair. Stern, honest right, and dishonest, ignoble wrong are shorn away of their distinctive features, and one line of conduct mixes up with the other. And generally material success is shown to be the outcome of strong personal will, or clever designing conduct rewarded accordingly.

The power
of low-class
fiction.

And, we say, the question in the text, “Understandest thou what thou readest?” is answered most truly by these readers, “How can I?” No,

indeed they cannot. No man has guided them; they do not know the harm of such habitual reading. Oh! parents, guardians, friends, all who have the power to help and advise your people, do turn your attention to this; do see that your children and your young friends are at least warned; do tell them that the writers and publishers of those books are not thinking of what is good for them to read, but only how to sell their books and make their profits by ministering to a poor craving taste.

Dear friends who hear me, do you think I am talking unnecessarily? do you think such a subject as this unworthy to take up your Sunday morning's thoughts? Believe me, I look upon it as most important. Surely some of you have seen and felt in yourselves a few years back some of the harm there is. Do believe it; it is worthy of your consideration. Those readers themselves will thank you if only you can, and you will, help them. Not, it may be, at first. You can afford to wait.

Books of
fiction in
general.

And now to go on to ourselves. As we are on the subject of fiction, let us start from this. All of us occasionally read that class of book which we call novels. Now what is the function of a novel? To amuse and to recreate; to give a rest from work or stiffer reading; to pleasantly pass away a few spare hours, and to make them so pleasantly pass by just employing the brain

enough. Is there anything more? Yes; every good novel has a distinct and definite teaching. And it is the working up of this with pleasing description and picturing and dialogue which makes the novel good, and shows the hand of a master who is worth our study.

A good novel is a noble work. Some of our writers are true and sterling. Let us find them out, and test them in this way. What is their object in writing the book? How is that succeeded in? The power of Charles Dickens lies in this. He wrote each book with an object—he had something to teach. One never lays down any of his books without a feeling of good. Thackeray did not quite so much keep this object in view. He had the satire to expose abuses, but he does not seem to have desired to produce the same earnestness, earnest feeling in his readers. This Dickens did, this George Eliot, this Charles Kingsley, this too, many, whom you who read much, will know.

We have stayed some time on novels. To us, who are daily mixed up with the rush of life, the reading of papers, and occasionally the magazines, becomes a positive necessity to keep us level with current events and thoughts. We ought to know what is going on. Experience modifies many of our first convictions, and corrects hasty judgments. The more we know of the daily history of our fellows, the clearer and

The daily
papers.

Society
papers.

fairer and less prejudiced those judgments will be. But there is another class of periodical which has come into prominence of recent years, and that is so-called Society papers. And here is given the field for some of the most pernicious and impertinent writing that disgraces the great calling of the press. It is pernicious because it is constantly exaggerating. It is also frequently false, because gossip we know grows and grows till it outgrows the first truth with which it started. To read much of this kind of paragraph writing about other people's doings would make the most hopeful a pessimist on the subject of our social morality of life and thought and practice. And equally, too, such writing is impertinent. Though each one of us has to be judged in his own sphere, little or great, by the decision and estimate of his fellows, yet we have no right to intrude in the private life of our citizens, and drag out their secrets, and twist them into what the correspondent imagines to be the real facts of the case.

This class of reading is very rarely of profit to you and me; often its effect is bad on the general reader, and vexatious to the persons whose names are mentioned; and, above all, it stimulates that sort of growing desire to rake out the faults and failings of our fellows, great or small, and chuckle miserably at their discomfiture.

And now, suddenly to break away, to us

Christians and Churchmen comes the question of strictly religious reading. This ought to have its distinct place. It ought never to be set aside. It mingles insensibly with secular reading at times. The life of a good man bridges over the two border lines. I will go farther. To my mind, when any man reads conscientiously there are no real border lines—he does all for his own improvement, and so to God's glory. Well, devotional books ought to be read, and read earnestly. Sometimes a volume of good sermons—Kingsley, Robertson, Pusey, Liddon, Vaughan, Phillips, Brooks—these are such a refreshing force, to take one for the leisure of an hour of rest and make the thoughts our own.

The place that God's own book holds in each man's life is another very important consideration. We have to learn to love the book and its reading before we really profit by it. Bible-reading, of all things, must be left to the man's own heart. It seems almost useless to do it as a duty. There is no charm about the formal opening of its pages. It must be a habit of pleasure before it can be of real help to you and me. But those who know it best appreciate its teachings for the day and hour no less than its glorious and certain comfort, and its solemn note of warning, and its sure guide for conduct. Last of all, the sceptic does homage to its power and vigour and brilliancy as a literary work. What a testimony! It speaks a great

deal to us who believe it to be the written word of our loving Father.

Atheistic
writings.

That word "sceptic," leads me on to the last class of literature which I want to touch on to-day. There is a growing mass of atheistic and infidel publications, and they are increasingly hostile to religion. Some are coldly sceptical; some construct a newer code of life and thought in place of that of Jesus Christ; some seek only to destroy His power, and leave men free, as they call it, from the degradation of superstition. The more outspoken class of this reading offends far more than it convinces. English men and women are not likely to be won by it. But the more seductive, because more refined, books of this latter half of our century are winning their perverts. For some persons it would be better never to read them; for others it is a duty to go through them and see what they have to tell us. This one fact remains to both classes of readers. Before you begin ask God's help; ask Him to guide you in that reading, and turn the world's lie, wherever it may be found, into His own truth to your eyes—then you may read fearlessly. Some of us have made this rule before we open any book which seems as though it possessed a deadly power of unsettling the mind, to put up a short petition to God to keep us from the danger and to confirm our faith. Then we dare open and read, and out of the strength He

The help of
the Spirit of
God.

supplies we are led to see the weakness of the insidious attacks on His truth.

And now, last thought of all—greatest difficulty, perhaps, of all—the mass of written and printed matter all round us. The gigantic store of knowledge—the quantity that meets us—which, what, how, must we, shall we, need we read? Again we can only say to decide this, as in every other question in the Christian's life, ask the Holy Spirit to guide you as He has promised to do, and then you will be led to choose aright.

It is said that a great Indian prince, Dabshelim, once collected a library so numerous that 100 Brahmins were scarcely sufficient to keep it in order, and it required 1000 dromedaries to transport it on one occasion from one of his palaces to the other, to which he desired it to be removed. And the prince ordered his librarians to set to work on an epitome of the collection. In twenty years they produced a cyclopædia of 1200 volumes. On its being presented, he professed himself incapable of such extensive study. Again and again they reduced it, till at last it was brought to a single volume. And now the monarch was advanced in years, and could scarcely read that one book, and his Grand Vizier said, “Illustrious sovereign, though I have but an imperfect knowledge of the great library, I will undertake to give you a brief though true abstract of it from this book which I have mastered. In one minute you shall read it

through, but you shall find matter for reflection for the rest of your life." Having said this, he took a tablet and wrote with a golden style :—

1. The greater part of the sciences comprise but one single word, "perhaps;" and the whole history of mankind contains no more than three—they are *born*, *suffer*, and *die*.

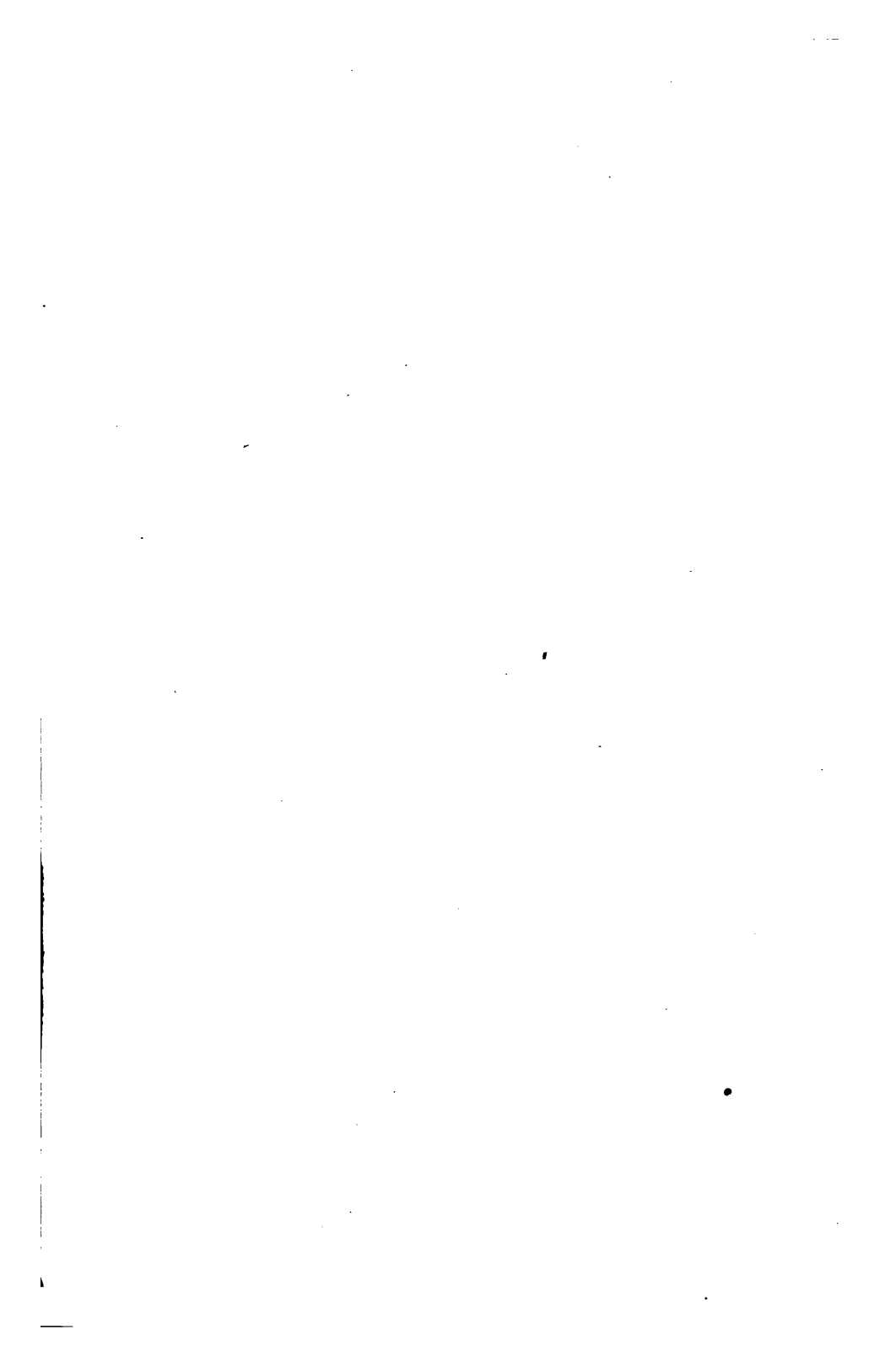
2. Love nothing but what is good, and do all that you love to do; think nothing but what is true, and speak not all you think.

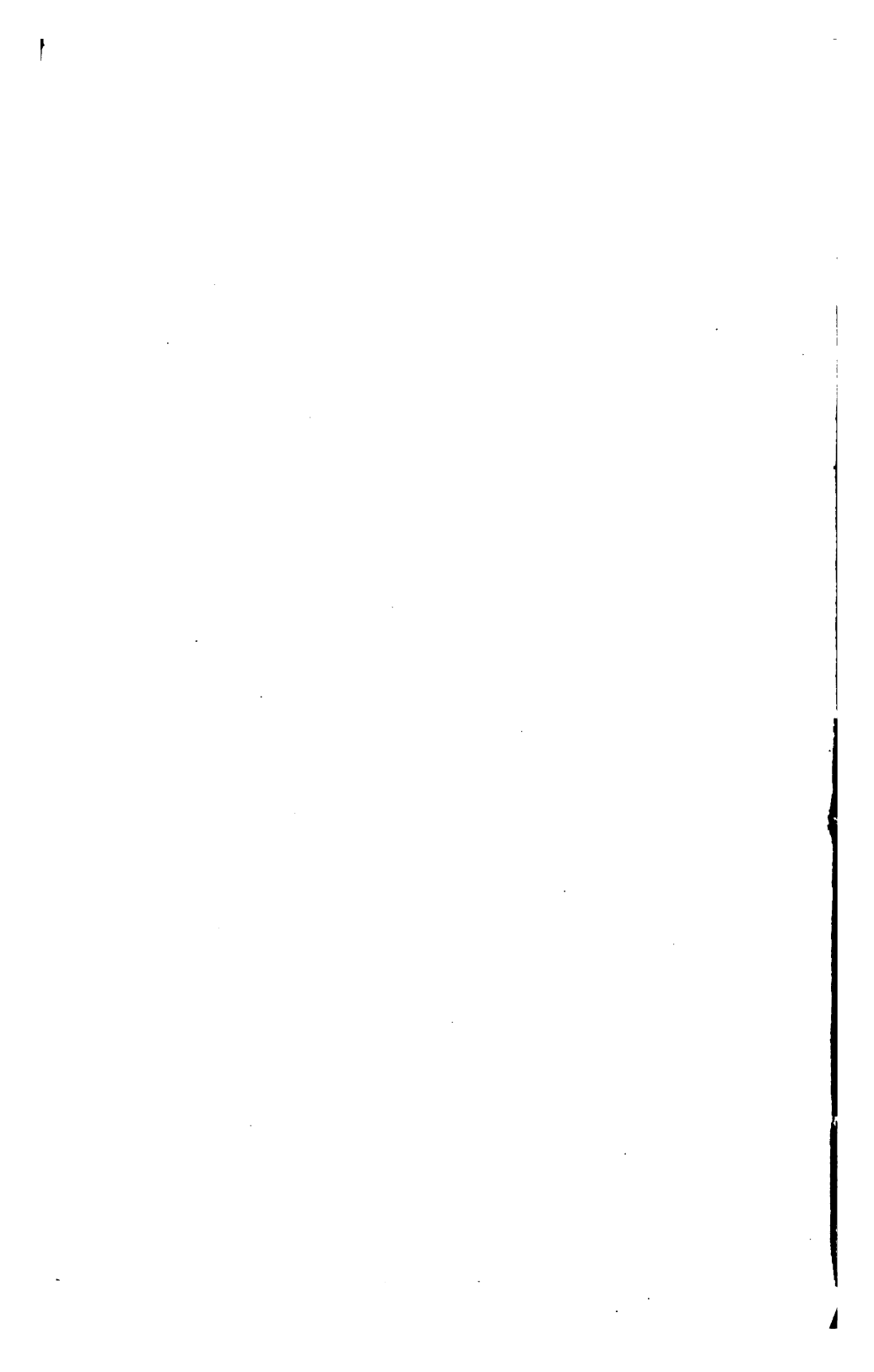
3. Govern yourselves; it is child's-play then to govern all else.

4. O kings and people, there is no happiness without virtue, and virtue cannot be without the fear of God.

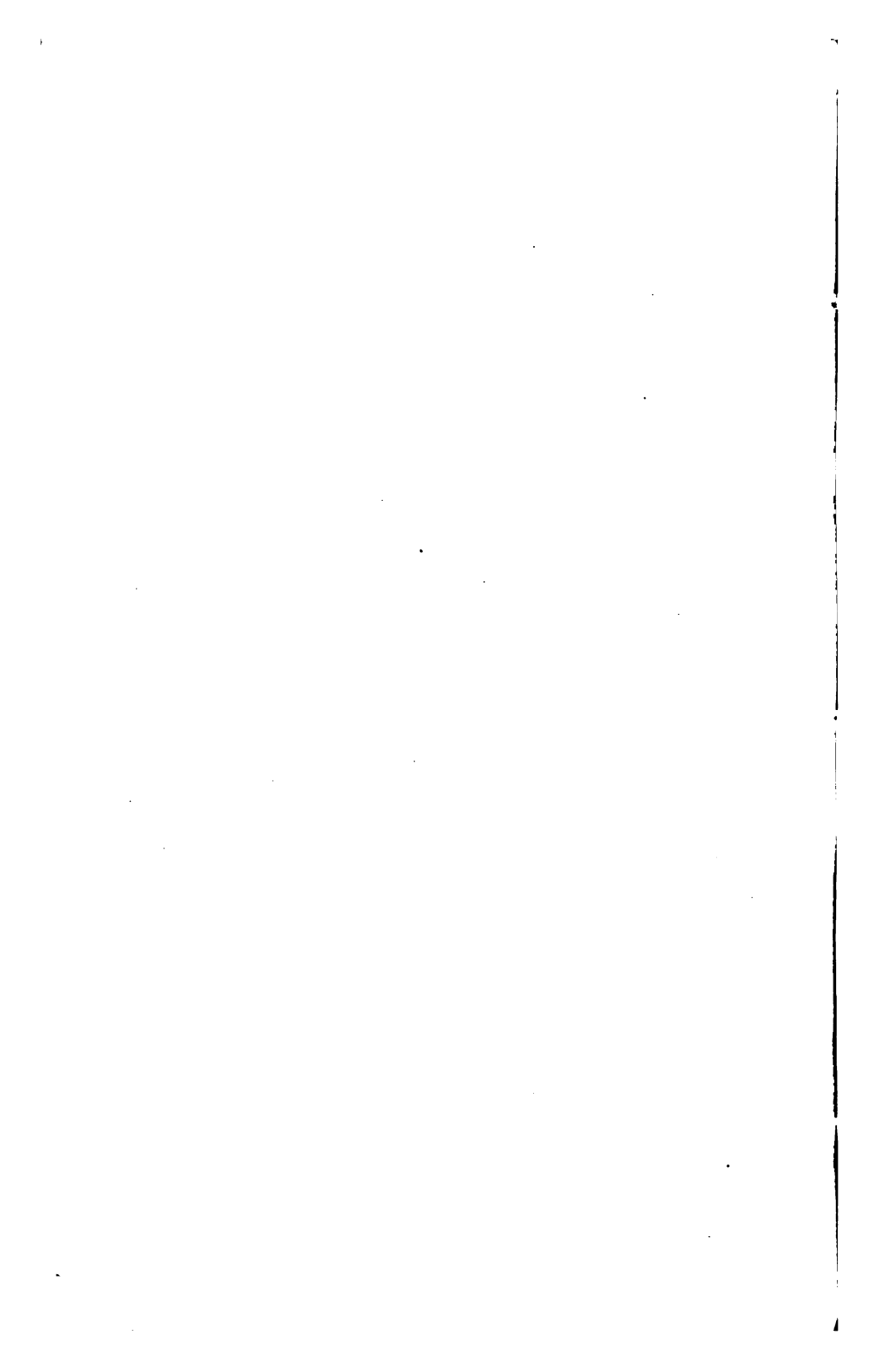
What more, *in one sense*, have we learnt now? what more can all our literature teach us? Ask God's help, that whatever be our reading—wide or limited, deep or cursory, serious or light—we may build it on the foundation of the faith of this knowledge, and follow that guiding in the practice of daily life.



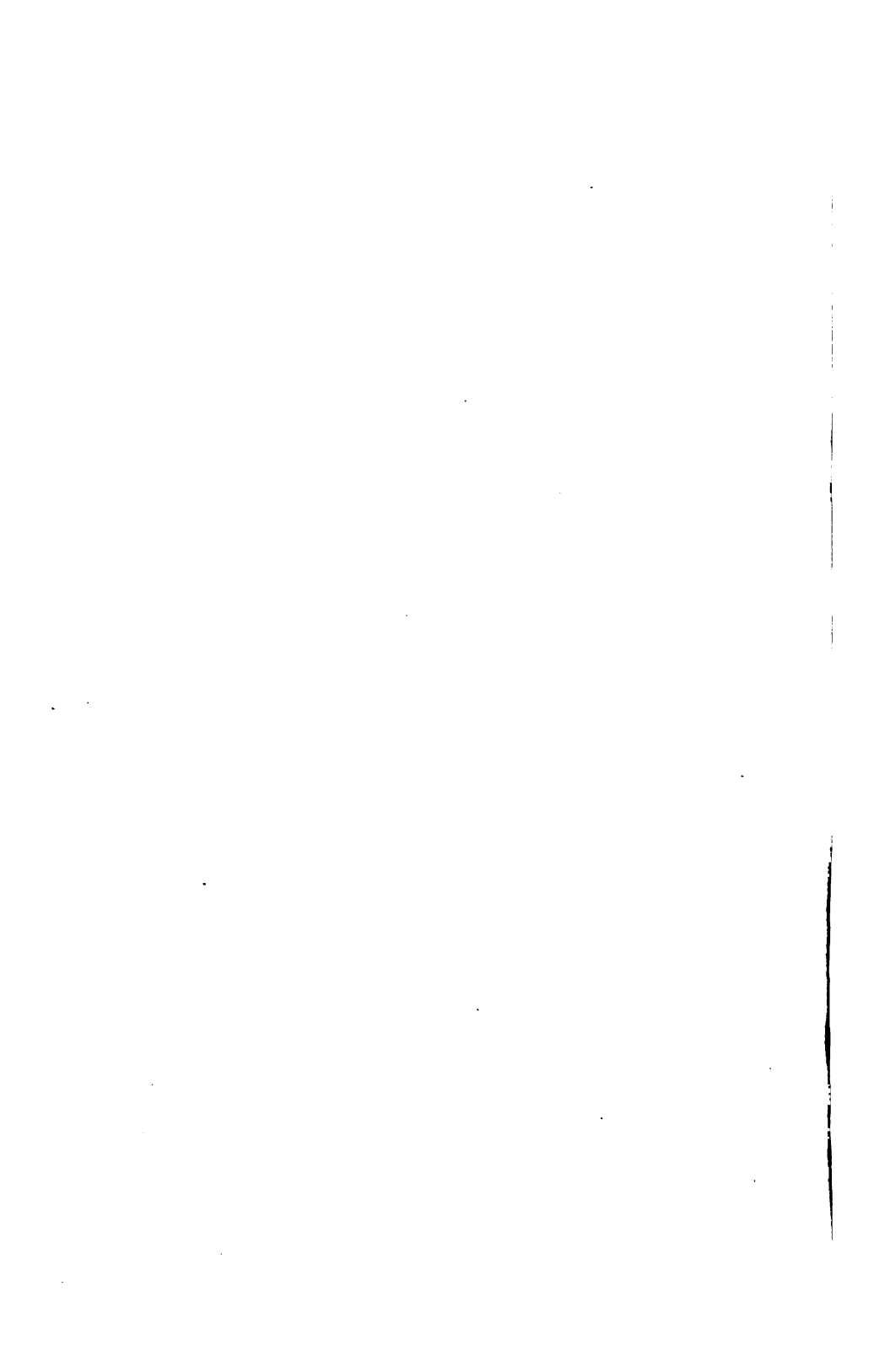


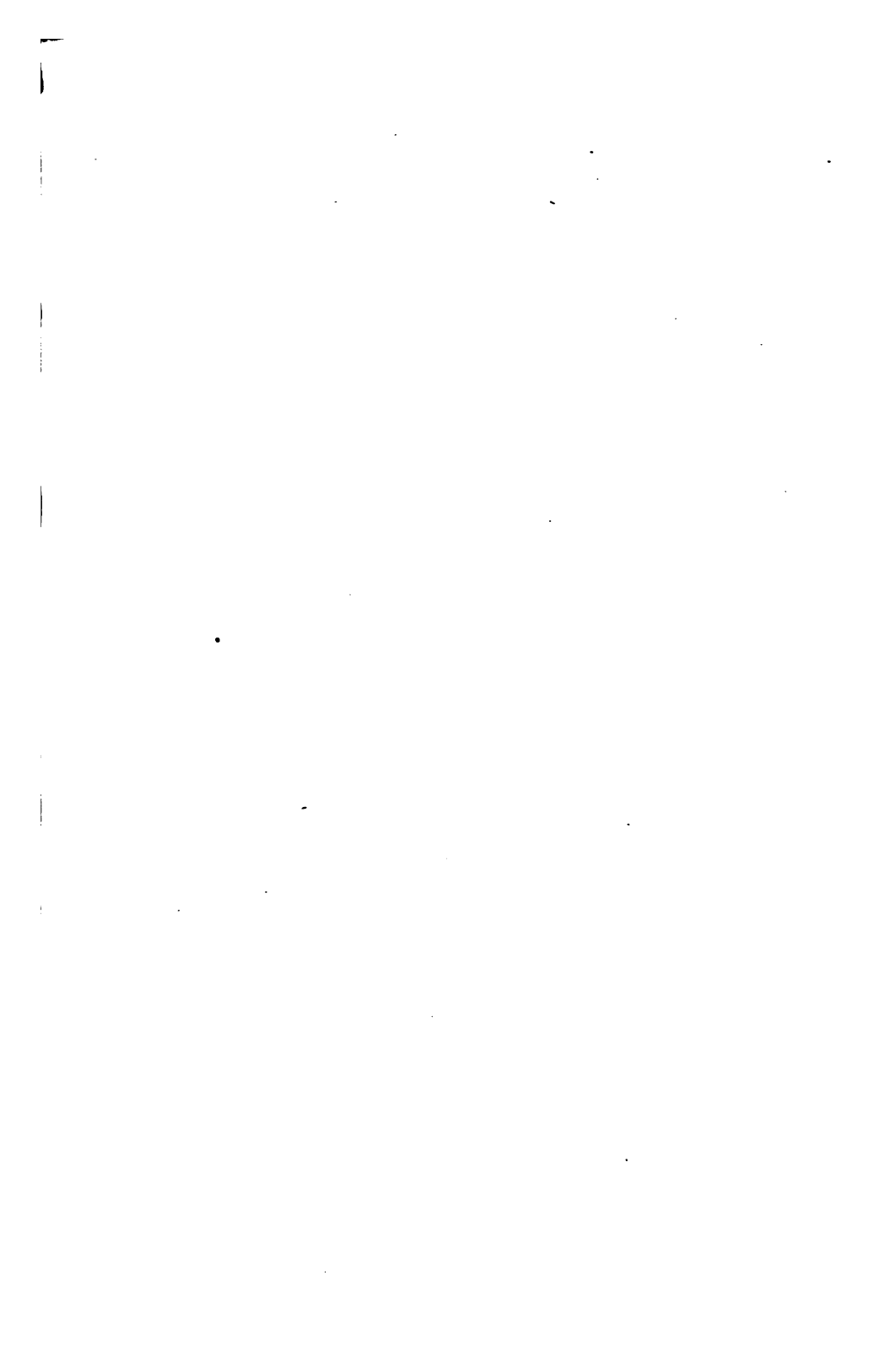




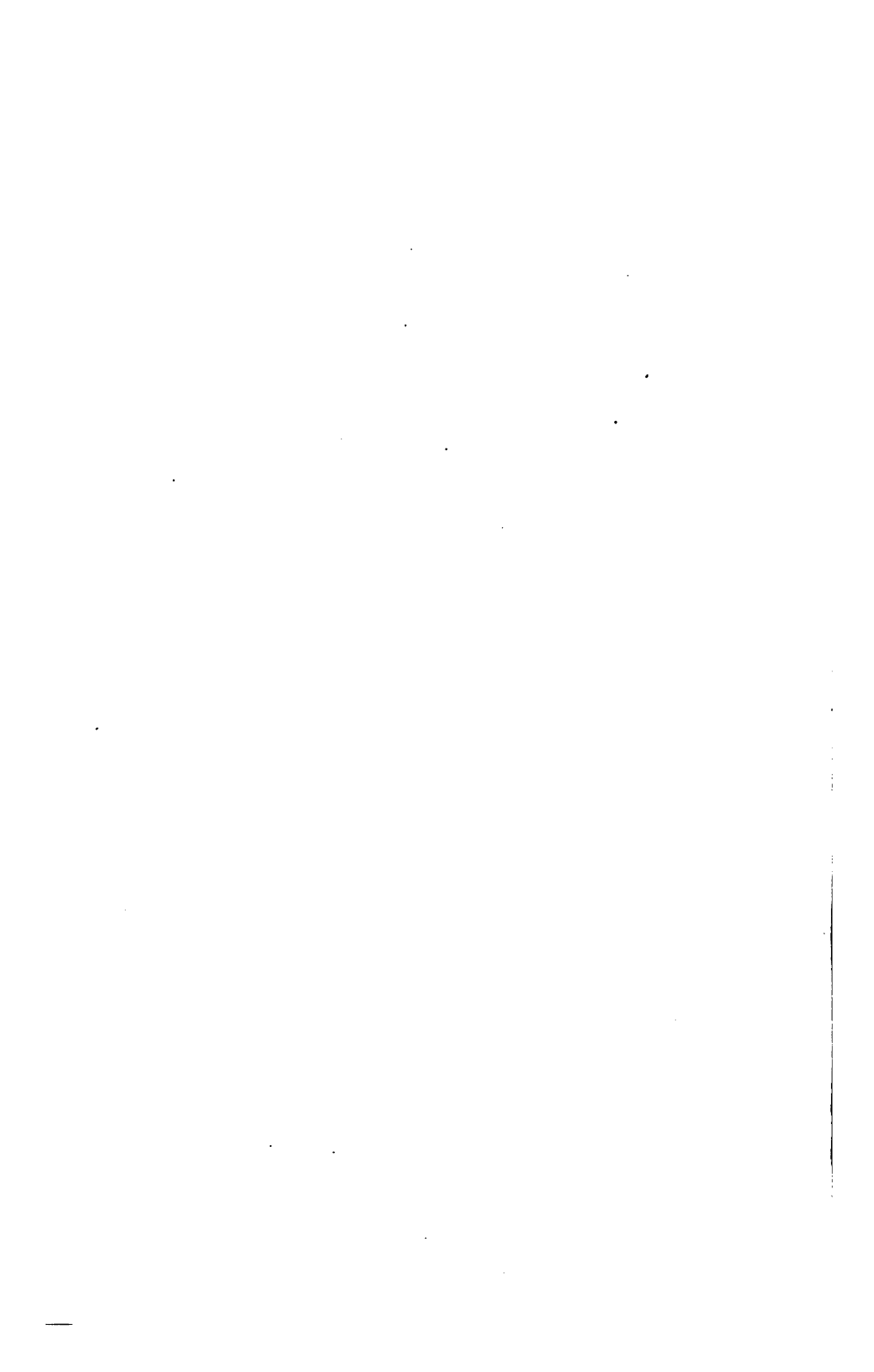


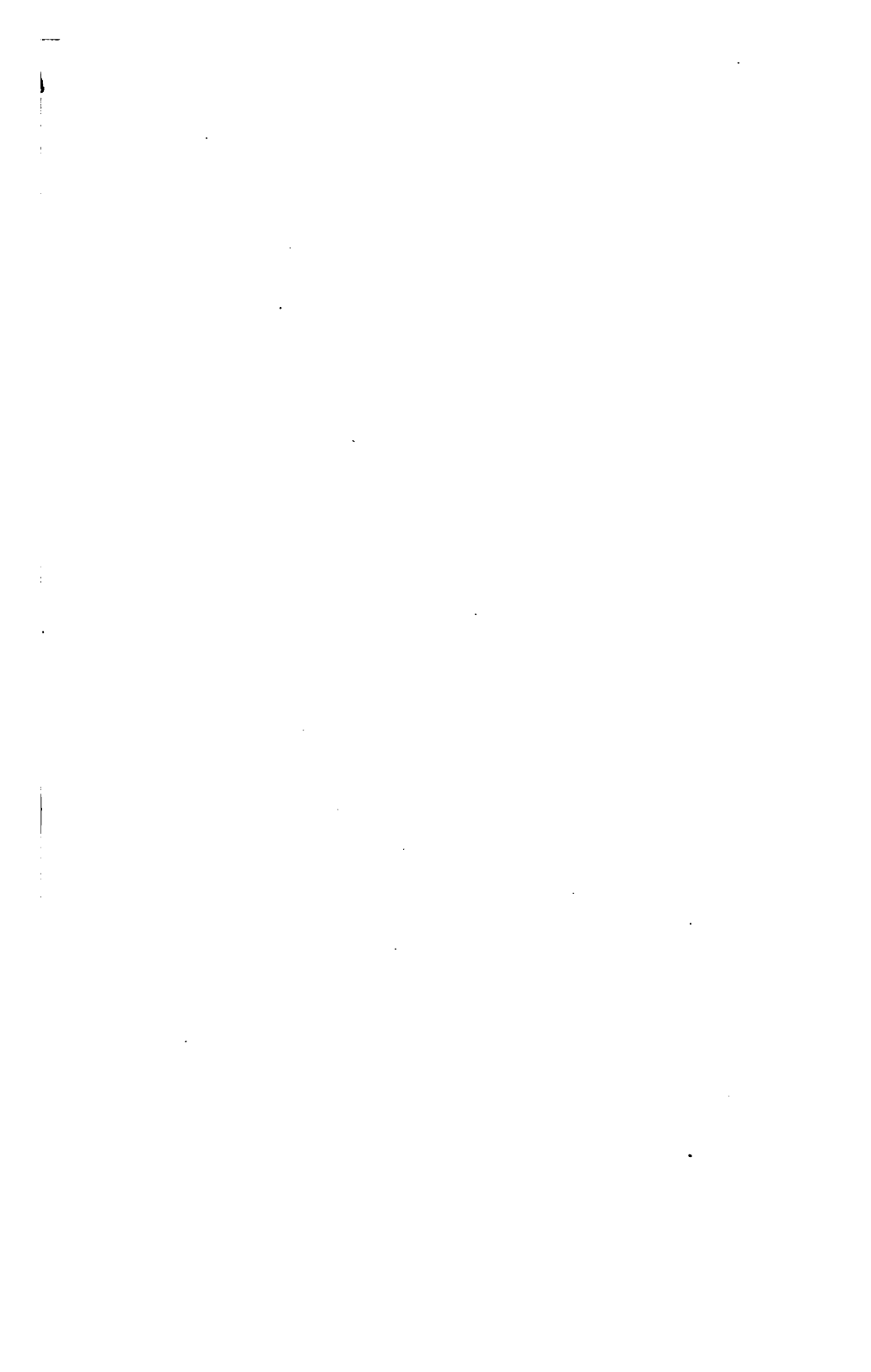


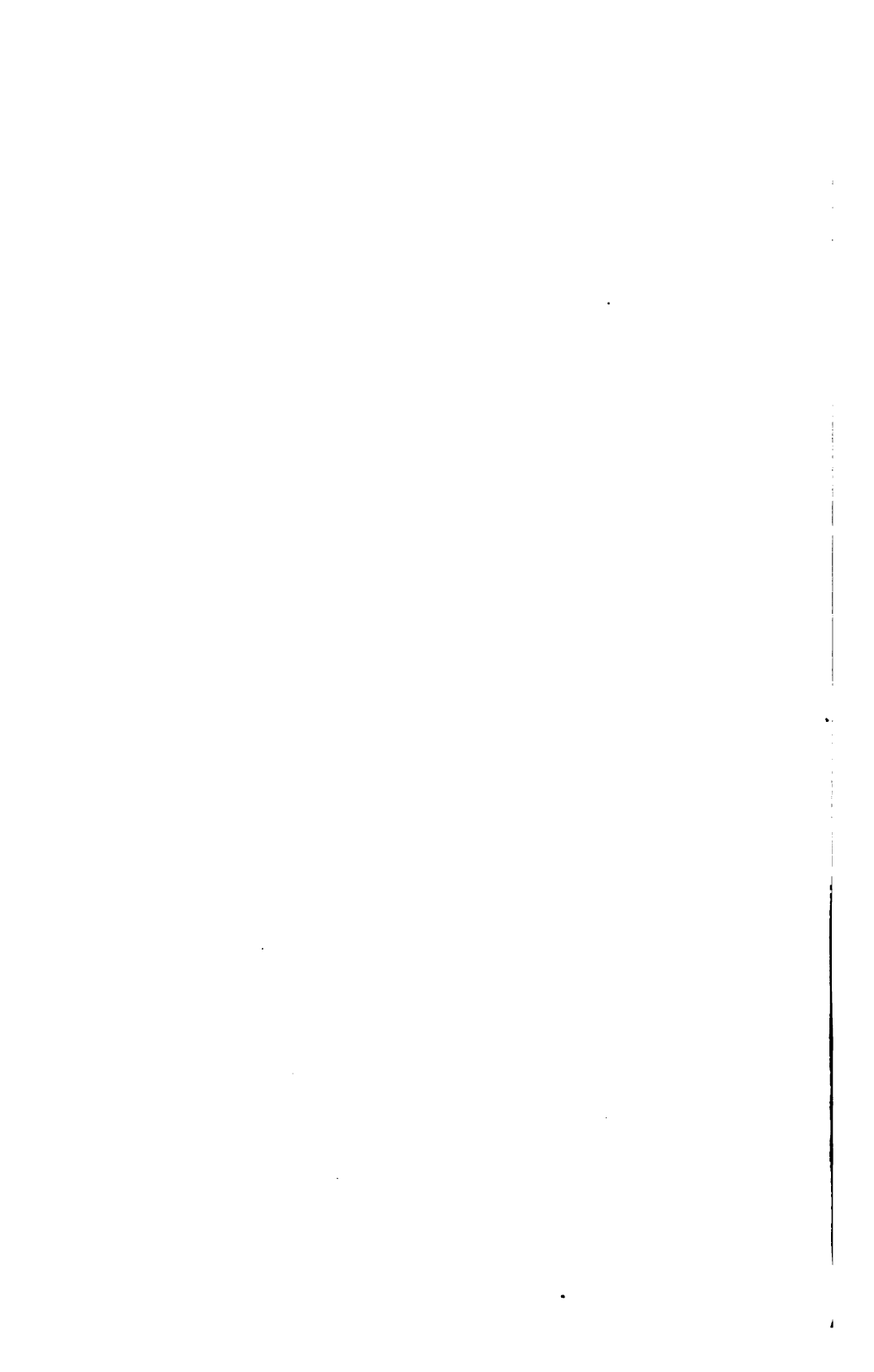


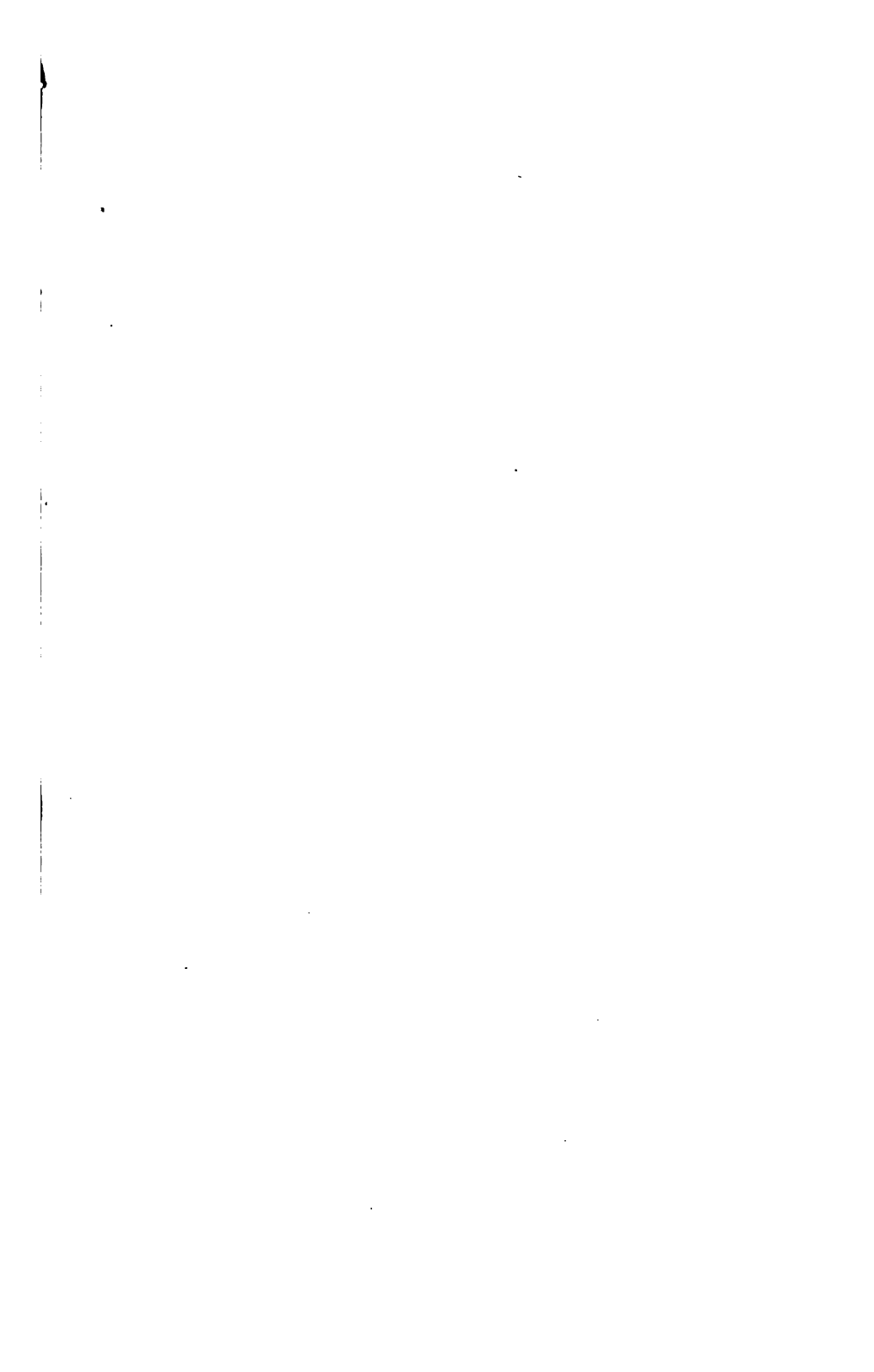


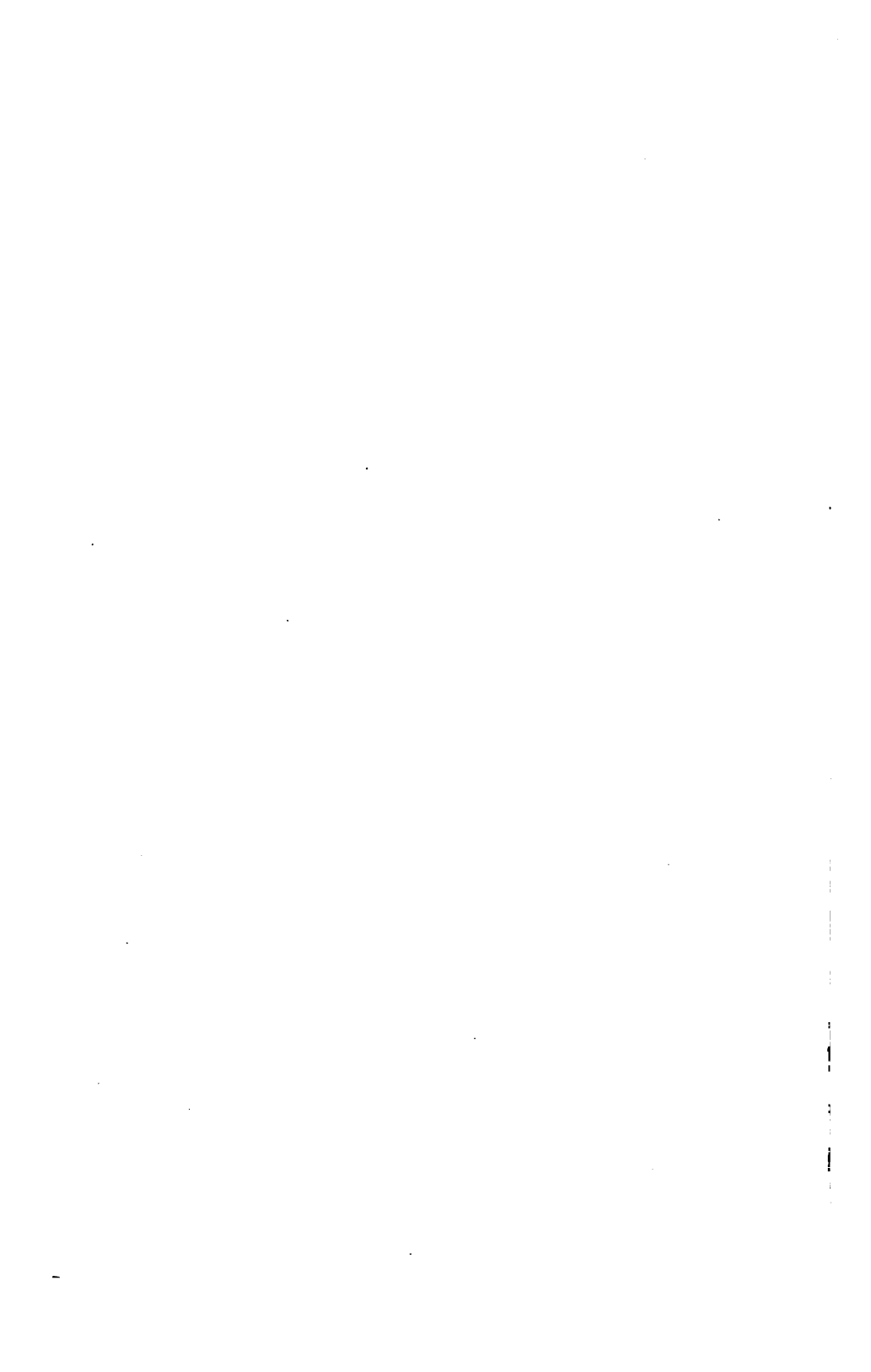


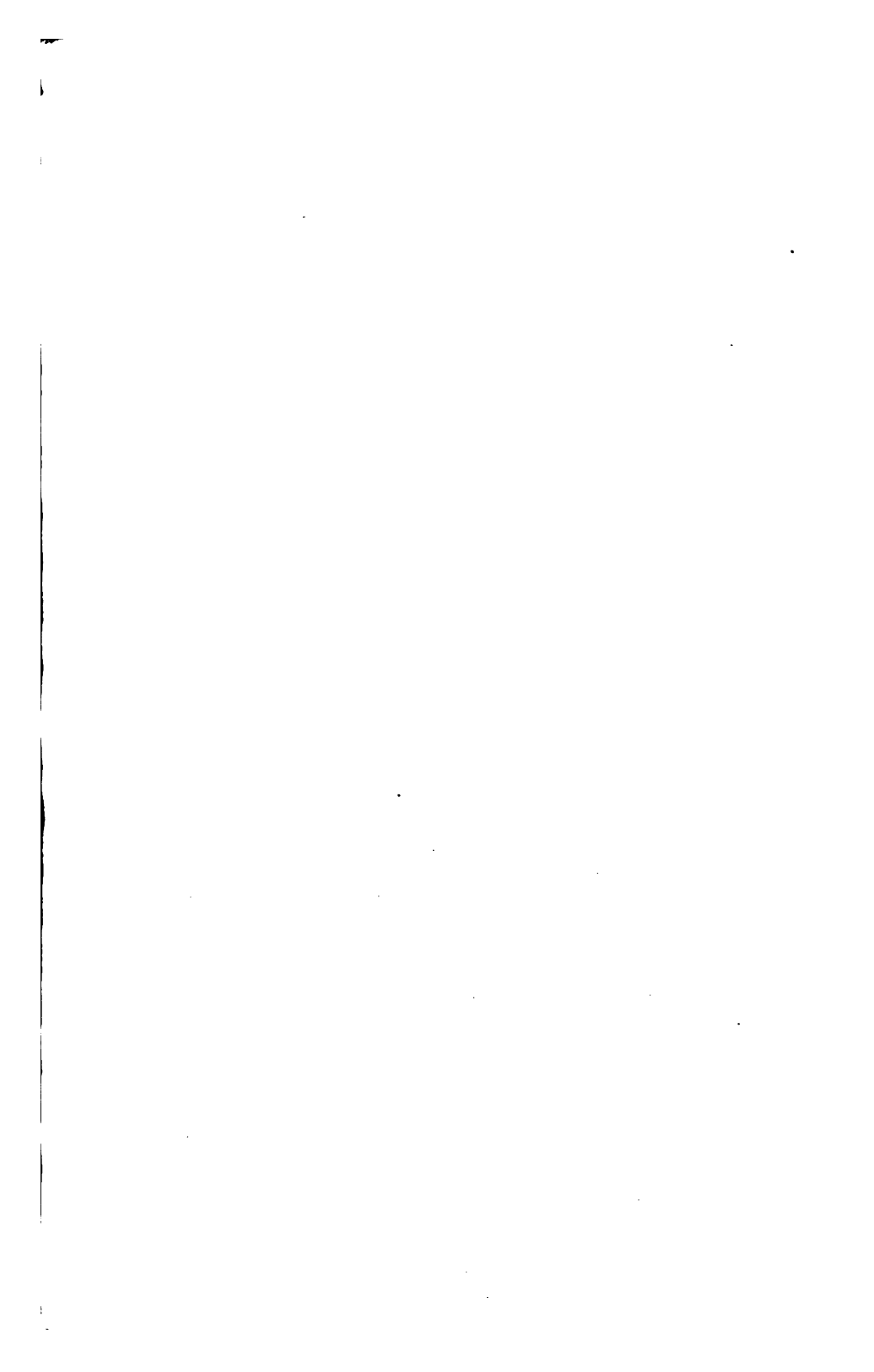


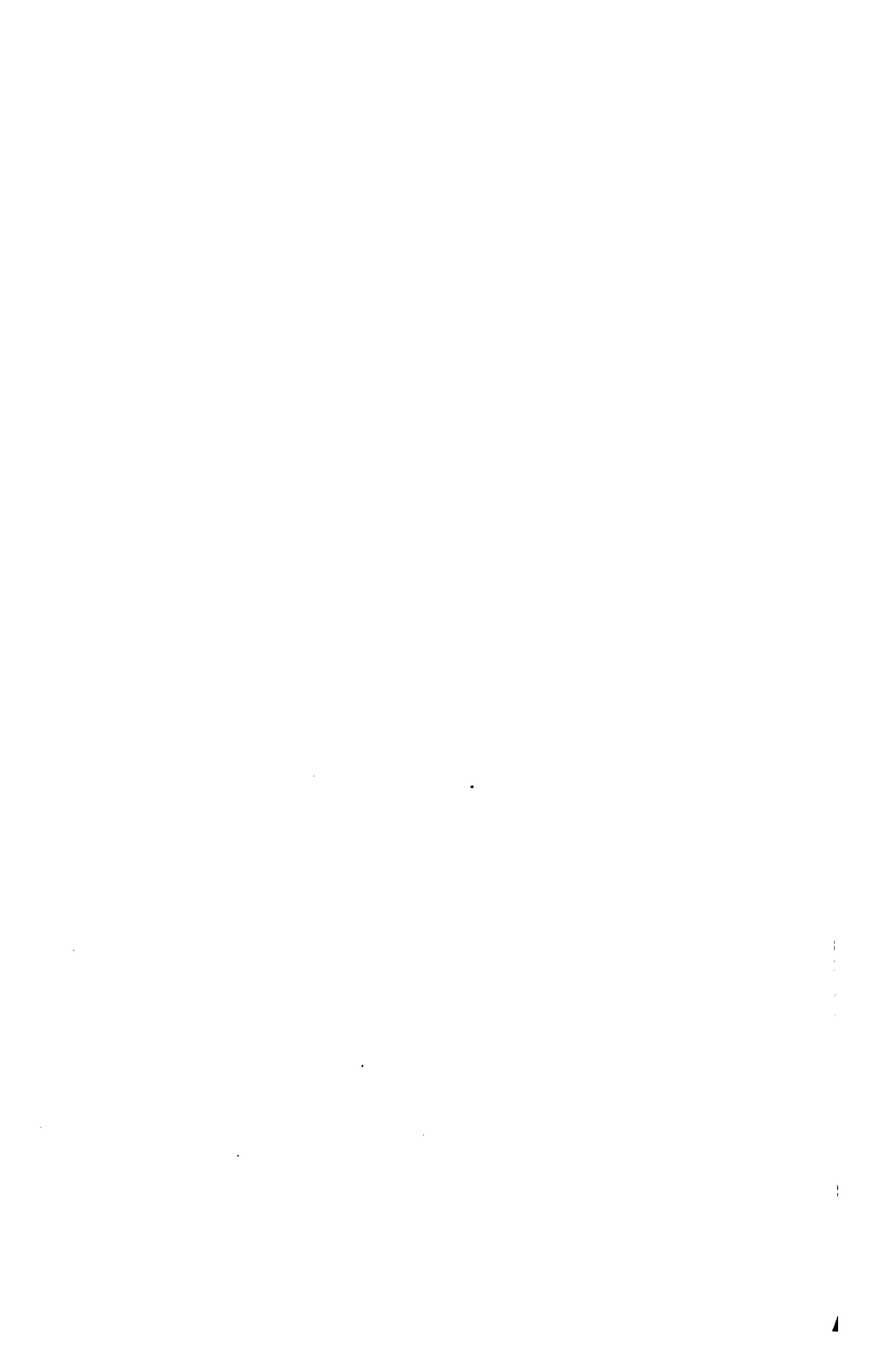


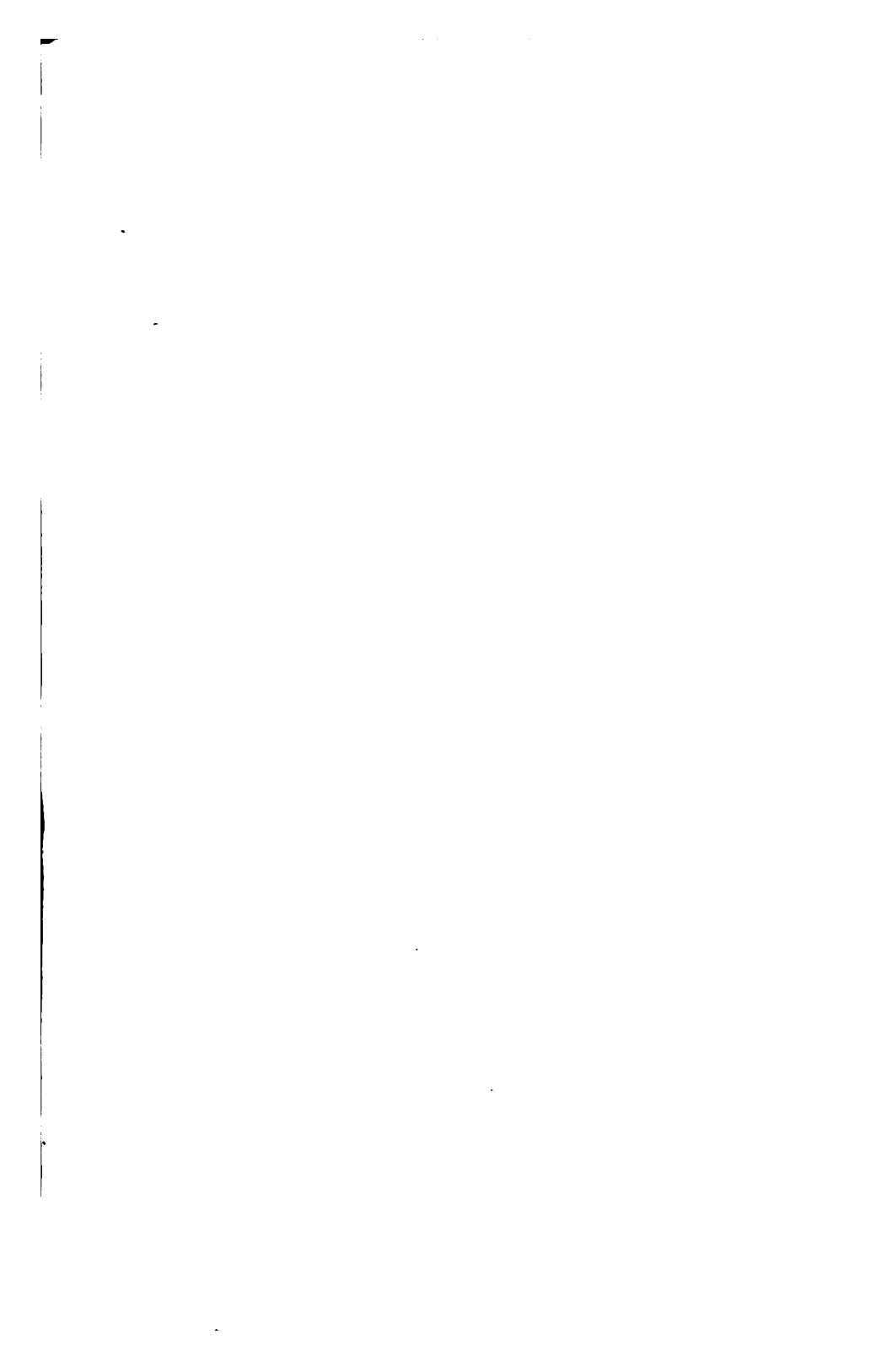












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